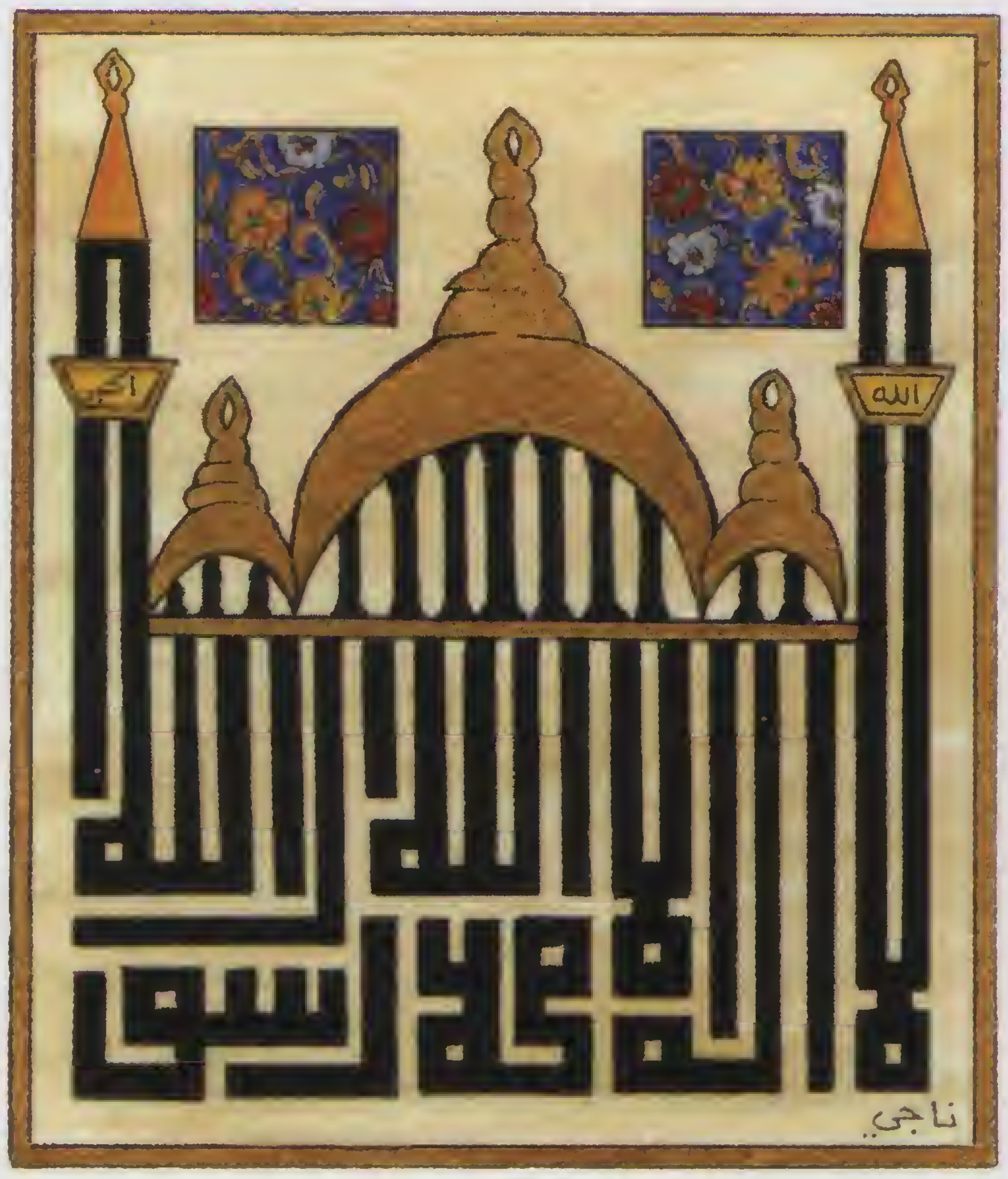
The Silver Dirham

The Power of the *Shahadah*



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By the middle of the 9th century CE, the great 'Abbasid empire had disintegrated into a series of provincial states ruled by former 'Abbasid governors. Of the many breakaway principalities that weakened the central authority of the 'Abbasid state in Baghdad, the Samanids of Central Asia were perhaps the most important.

The Samanid domains extended from Iraq in the west, to the borders of India in the east, and from Turkistan in the north, to the Persian Gulf in the south. Bukhara, the Samanid capital, became an important and thriving centre of Persian language and culture. The Samanaids were *Sunni* Muslims who encouraged the spread of Islam in the territories to the north and east of their realm. Their merchants, for example, brought *Din al Haq al-Islam* to many Turkic tribes settled in western China.

In the 10th century CE, vast silver deposits were discovered in the mountains of Badakhshan, a remote area of northeastern Afghanistan, and in the Panjshir Valley in the Hindu Kush. The mad rush to find even more new seams of silver in many ways resembled the American gold rush of the 19th century. Soon, Samanid rulers were minting silver dirhams of a very high purity. These coins became the most widely circulated of any Islamic coins ever minted. Why was this?

During this period, Viking Norsemen from northern Europe began to move down the rivers of eastern Europe in order to meet Arab, Persian and Greek merchants. The Vikings had no currency of their own and no source of silver in the forests of Scandinavia. In their insatiable pursuit of silver, Viking merchants bartered for Samanid silver dirhams in market towns such as Bulghar on the Volga River in today's Russia.

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It is reported that millions of silver dirhams -- mostly of Samanid origin -- were transported to the Viking homelands in Scandinavia during the 10th century CE. The Samanid ruler, Nasr ibn Ahmad (913-943 CE), reportedly depleted the formerly rich silver mines of Badakhshan in an attempt to provide enough silver to meet Viking demand. The once much coveted, high quality silver coins were debased and, over time, were reduced to having a silver content of only 5 percent. These coins, of course, were no longer sought after. The decline in the export of silver to northern Europe coincidentally heralded the demise of the Samanid dynasty and their domination in the region.

As proof of the very active commercial links between the Vikings and Muslim lands, hoards of Islamic dirhams are still frequently unearthed in northern Russia, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and even Ireland and Iceland. The fact that these dirhams are often found chopped into halves and quarters indicate that they were likely used as a form of currency in the Viking north for several centuries.

The standard silver currency in the Islamic world was the dirham. The production of Samanid dirhams was extremely labour-intensive. First, the silver had to be extracted from mines deep in the mountains. Thousands of workers were employed to find the silver ore, dig it out and then transport it to a processing centre. Here the slow and dangerous task of smelting and refining the metal took place. Finally, bars of pure silver would be shipped to various cities throughout the Samanid Empire where they would be used to mint coins. Bukhara, Balkh and Samarqand were three such locations and coins minted there would bear the names of these cities.

The actual minting of a Samanid silver dirham involved several important steps. First, an expert team of master engravers painstakingly carved the image of both sides of the coin onto heated bronze or iron dies. This required great skill as the finely detailed Arabic inscriptions had to be meticulously inscribed in reverse on both dies.

The completed dies were then ready to be used. The upper, or 'reverse' die would be set into a hand-held punch while the lower or 'obverse' die was mounted on an anvil.

In another area of the mint, the silver bars were rolled into thin sheets which were cut up into round blanks called 'flans'. These were placed in an oven to soften before being struck. A two-man team of strikers was now ready to mint the coins. While one placed the hot flan between the two dies, the other would strike -- sometimes several times – the punch with a heavy hammer. In this manner, experienced teams could easily produce twenty or more coins per minute, or thousands per day!